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**News****Town Meeting will be delayed because of school budget**By **Davin Wilfrid and Jason G.Howe***Staff Writers**(single page view)**(view as multiple pages)*

NORTH ANDOVER — In the wake of School Superintendent Harry K. Harutunian's resignation, the annual Town Meeting has been postponed until June 5 so officials can better understand and likely audit the \$34.1 million school budget he created.

"There's still many, many unanswered questions," selectmen Chairwoman Rosemary C. Smedile said. "Because Dr. Harutunian was the author of the budget and there's so many questions from parents and the public in general, we felt we needed more time to get the answers we need."

Harutunian accepted a \$187,000 buyout Tuesday night, leaving behind a budget request that has left many parents and officials confused. To better understand Harutunian's numbers, School Committee member Barbara Whidden is expected to call for a forensic audit of the budget at tonight's School Committee budget workshop.

A forensic audit tracks how money is moved through a budget, line by line, dollar by dollar, and should provide a clearer picture of the School Department's financial standing as committee members and school administrators approach the budget season's home stretch.

"We're not doing this because we believe there was wrongdoing, but because we want to know where things are going," Whidden said. "We're also going to set up a subcommittee to make sure a new system is in place that provides transparency."

Determining the audit's scope is up for debate in coming days,

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but Whidden said she has talked with other committee members and is determined to untangle what she called an "unwieldy" budget in need of detailed explanation. Chairman Alfred Perry confirmed committee members will support an audit.

"We're not ready to make any kind of comment about whether the (\$34.1 million) number is too high or too low," Whidden said. "We're going to do our homework this time. It's really time-consuming, but we're making progress."

Acting Superintendent Richard Bergeron said he welcomed the audit. Beyond investigation into the current budget, he hopes auditors can provide insights into how to streamline the department's accounting and budgeting process.

"In my experience, the accountants' advice leads to higher efficiency," Bergeron said. "Of course, it also makes certain no fraud has been committed."

The cost of the audit could range from \$6,500 to more than \$25,000, depending on how much of the budget they want investigated, Whidden said. They have not decided whether the audit would delve into past budgets or focus just on 2005-2006. The cost will be available once a firm is selected.

In February, Harutunian requested a \$2.9 million increase over the current \$31.2 million budget to maintain staffing levels at all schools, while Town Manager Mark H. Rees recommended a \$200,000 increase. Three weeks ago, the Finance Committee demanded justification for an 11 percent increase in the special education program, saying the \$9.9 million request was up to \$1.5 million more than necessary.

Harutunian resigned Tuesday after weeks of controversy surrounding his affair with a school employee. The School Committee was in the process of investigating whether a 29 percent raise the woman received, worth about \$10,000, was tied to that relationship.

Smedile said there are two benefits to postponing Town Meeting from May 8 until June 5 — the town will have a better handle on how much money the state will provide the town in the form of school aid, and the budget issue has brought together the selectmen and the School Committee instead of putting them at odds.

"Coming out of the storm we might actually have a tighter and more efficient and cooperative government," she said.

Smedile said a small group of officials and residents will show up at the regularly scheduled Town Meeting May 8 and immediately vote to recess until June 5. None of the 50 warrant articles — including the school budget — will be voted on at the May 8 meeting.

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Town Clerk Joyce Bradshaw said postponing Town Meeting would not cost the town a significant amount of money. She said the warrant for the meeting had not yet been printed when the selectmen made their decision.

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Yes No

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